

‘Dulce et Decorum Est’: A Lost Generation of Roman Elites in the Hannibalic War

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Author’s Note: This is an extended version of the paper I presented at the 2016 Hayes Graduate Research Forum – Humanities Division. Thus, it reads much like an oral presentation, rather than a formally written piece of scholarship. It draws upon some of my dissertation research, as well as certain sections and phrases from the dissertation itself, which will not be published until July 2016. Footnotes were not originally included in the paper as it was written for oral presentation, and these were only inserted for this submission. Please contact the author if there are any concerns about citations.

Between 218 and 216 BC, over half of the 300 members of the Roman Senate perished while serving against the armies of Hannibal of Carthage.¹ These were staggering losses which were unprecedented in the centuries-long history of the Republic’s principal governing institution. As we will see, the dead likely amounted to virtually the entire generation of eminent men of military age within the Senate, that is, of Roman nobles aged 18 to 45, who were all but eradicated. As might be expected, the consequences of this decimation of Rome’s ruling class

¹ The most reliable source for this narrative can be found in Livy Books 22-24.

were momentous. Indeed, I argue that the replacement in the Senate of this lost generation with mostly young, politically inexperienced, and relatively undistinguished men eventually resulted in a decade of political rupture in the Republic. Ultimately, with the death of over half of the Senate's members, the century-long movement from oligarchic to aristocratic control over the state underwent a temporary, though significant, reversal.

Undoubtedly, much of this thesis will only be useful, or perhaps even decipherable, to a specialist audience of ancient historians. What is perhaps more generally relevant to those who work in the history of any era, indeed even in any discipline, however, is the way in which *demographic* disruption acted as a key agent here in influencing large-scale *political* and *social* trends. What I hope to accomplish today, then, in light of the varied areas of study at the conference, is two-fold. First, as I said, I would like to present one episode within the Roman world when the loss of a generation of elites interrupted the steady development of collective aristocratic rule. My second goal is a bit more methodological. While laying out the larger argument, I hope to highlight some of the potential advantages of incorporating demographic factors into any multi-causal analysis of political and social change.

Before we can engage with all of this directly, however, it seems prudent to lay out some of the basic features of the Roman Republic in order to clarify my arguments a bit further. I have no doubt that many of you have seen *Gladiator*, which is, of course, a flawless depiction of governance during the Roman Empire; the Republic, unfortunately, is quite different, and so some cursory remarks are necessary here. While the Roman Republic of the late third century BC was technically a direct democracy in the sense that nearly all officials were elected directly by the public and because ratification by public vote was necessary for nearly all official measures, effective political power lay in the hands of the 300 men who made up the Roman

Senate.² The institutional basis of senatorial control in this period is a bit convoluted, and need concern us only briefly.³ In essence, when the Republic was faced with a pressing issue foreign or domestic, a publicly elected official would consult the Senate for its suggestions. The Senate, after internal deliberation, would then promulgate its *consulta*, or its opinions on the matter, which instructed the magistrate on how to proceed. Occasionally, this could include the drafting of a bill which would be presented before an assembly of citizens for ratification. Both the adherence of Rome's magistrates to the directives of the Senate, as well as the formal approval of *consulta* by the assemblies, subsequently turned senatorial recommendations into law and state action.

Clearly, then, the Senate was a principal force in the political processes of the Republic. Indeed, it is remarkable that during the period of the Middle Republic, the Assemblies almost never rejected the *consulta* of the Senate, and magistrates rarely subverted the Senate's prerogatives by acting contrary to that body's wishes.⁴ Yet, Rome had no constitution in the modern sense, and there are no strictly legal reasons to explain why either the magistrates or the assemblies of citizens were not themselves sovereign. Instead, in order to explain the preeminence of the Senate, we must look to the political shifts of the centuries preceding Hannibal's invasion, namely the fourth and third centuries.⁵ By briefly examining these changes, we will be better positioned to see how the loss of a generation of nobles so dramatically

² Cf. Karl-J. Hölkamp, *Die Entstehung der Nobilität. Studien zur sozialen und politischen Geschichte der Römischen Republik im 4. Jhdt. V.Chr* (Stuttgart, 1987) and *Reconstructing the Roman Republic. An Ancient Political Culture and Modern Research* (Princeton, 2010) for more on this.

³ A basic primer can be found in Andrew Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1999) 65-93.

⁴ For a somewhat different picture, cf. Arthur Eckstein, *Senate and General: Individual Decision-Making and Roman Foreign Relations, 264-194 BC* (UCLA, 1987) and Bruno Bleckmann, *Die römische Nobilität im Ersten Punischen Krieg. Untersuchungen zur aristokratischen Konkurrenz in der Republik* (Berlin, 2002).

⁵ Again, Hölkamp (1987) is instructive for this.

disrupted the transition from a regime of charismatic oligarchs towards a collective aristocracy of office-holders.

One of the key elements accounting for this transition to senatorial preeminence was the evolution of membership within the Senate. Before the late 4th century BC, Rome's chief annual magistrates determined who could attend the Senate at each occasion of its meeting.⁶ Since selection was thus arbitrary, ad hoc, and relatively fluid, the Senate proved to be a weak institution because its members lacked both the incentives and the capacity to oppose the wishes of those who called on them for advice. Essentially, no one wants to tell their boss that he's making a real Roman mess of things. Further, the chief offices of the Republic in this early period were frequently monopolized by charismatic individuals or by powerful families. As a result, the Republic was largely in the hands of these men, whose re-elections secured their predominance. During the great upheavals of the late 4th century BC, however, an important shift occurred. Selection of senators passed from the hands of these powerful men and into the hands of two censors, one patrician and one plebeian, who would be elected every five years. Collegiality here was no accident or symbol. The commonly accepted view is that the Republic had been divided along patrician and plebeian lines since its 6th century inception. The presence of two censors was thus very likely an attempt at compromise between the groups in order to ensure cohesion.

Of course, these two censors, one patrician and the other plebeian, were prone to disagreement over who should be selected into the limited number of senatorial positions available. In order to avoid political gridlock, more objective standards for cooptation would be

⁶ This is the major argument of Tim Cornell, "The *Lex Ovinia* and the Emancipation of the Senate." In Bruun (Ed.) (Rome, 2000).

necessary. Over the course of the 4th and 3rd centuries, my dissertation argues that a custom developed that these censors would select as senators only those who had been elected to the Republic's most prestigious offices. In this way, objectivity in selection could be claimed, and the People, through their popular vote, would be integrated into the new system as the ultimate arbiters of admission into the political aristocracy. All of this *fundamentally* altered the Roman Republic. What this transformation of membership in the Senate brought about was the emergence of a new, hierarchically-arranged aristocracy of office-holders in the Senate, an aristocracy which was both meritocratic and semi-hereditary: Meritocratic because election to the requisite magistracy depended on distinguished military service and the reputation this service brought; and semi-hereditary because this reputation could be passed down as both social and political capital for future generations to use.

Still, the explanation for the obedience of the Roman People and its magistrates to the Senate is far too complex to be ascribed to this single *institutional* development. Instead, we should point also to the socio-political phenomenon known in Latin as *auctoritas*, which in many respects lies at the heart of the Senate's pre-eminence. 'Auctoritas' is the root of our own word 'authority', and this is actually a helpful way of imagining its function in the Roman context. For our purposes, the word signifies a range of types of influence or coercion, whether social, political, economic, or otherwise. An individual's *auctoritas* was tightly linked to the deeds and accomplishments which supported his election, as well as to his membership and rank within the nobility. Indeed, each individual senator had, to varying degrees, his own level of *auctoritas* depending on his rank and achievements, and this *auctoritas* was politically vital. It lent the senator added weight within senatorial debate, and also in future elections. During policy disputes, we might imagine each side of the argument as a sum of the *auctoritas* of its members.

Once one side reached a critical mass, the other side might be overawed and debate officially over. Yet, at the end of such deliberations, the Senate would present a united front. Expressed collectively, the *auctoritas* of all of these individual Senators made their will essentially irresistible. As a result, the Senate's final decisions on any issue would almost always be accepted.

At the same time, however, the *auctoritas* of each senator was a powerful tool for keeping other nobles in check. We've seen that the Roman state was, at its heart, an aristocracy, which was both meritocratic and semi-hereditary. As one might imagine, members of this aristocracy were obsessed with the continuity of their families within the political elite. Fair access to legitimate elections was therefore critical. As a result, this new aristocracy of office collectively feared the growth in power of any individual or group which might restrict the chances of electoral success for the broader elite. As a result, if any senator or clique of senators threatened to grow too powerful through, for instance, the monopolization of higher office or the intimidation of his peers, the collective Senate could, and often did, check them through any number of institutional and non-institutional restraints.

Some brief summary will help us get our bearings before the final stage of the argument. The Roman Republic developed over the 4th and 3rd centuries into a state ruled by a collective aristocracy. This is in large part because the *external* expression of the *auctoritas* of the Senate made its policy decisions all but irresistible. At the same time, expressed inwardly, this same *auctoritas* functioned as a restraint mechanism on the ambitions of the Senate's individual members. This was critical for maintaining internal harmony, especially because those families which had dominated the Republic in earlier periods continued to be active, and, on top of that, the essence of the aristocratic ethos had remained in many ways unchanged. Individuals

continued to be impelled to compete aggressively with one another for primacy because this system required competitive election to preserve aristocratic status. Further, in order to move up the ranks within the aristocracy, and increase one's own *auctoritas*, each stage on the rung of offices became increasingly competitive. The urge to outdo one's rivals thus remained a fundamental feature of the Roman Republic throughout its existence. While this did much to channel aristocratic competition towards the benefit of the community, it did very little to temper the underlying drive of individual elites to dominate. Only with the newfound communal authority to restrain individuals attempting to control the state, authority which was now channeled through the institution of the Senate, was the rule by powerful men halted by the rise of collective governance.

All of this finally brings us back both to our lost generation of senators and to the impact of a demographic crisis on political developments. We hear from the Roman author Livy that in 216 BC, following a series of terrible losses against Hannibal, there were 177 vacancies within the Senate out of the total 300 spots. Using demographic tools called model life tables coupled with our ancient sources, we can reconstruct how these deaths affected the age and *auctoritas* structures within the Senate. To begin with, all men between the ages of 18 and 45 were liable for conscription. In the period of the Hannibalic War, when Rome was faced with a series of existential threats, mobilization among this warrior aristocracy would have been extremely high. Indeed, this would have been especially true within what was essentially a military aristocracy. Out of a Senate of 300, where the average age of entry would have been roughly 28 years old, our Model Life Tables predict that approximately 165 individuals would have been between 18 and 45 years old. Considering our figure of 177 vacancies, we can again use the Model Life Tables to roughly calculate the effects of natural attrition within the population aged over 45

since the last census 4 years prior. This likely accounts for 25-35 of these 177 deaths. We are thus left with about 140-150 surplus mortalities caused by non-natural causes which must in turn be attributable to war. Considering the figure of 165 men in the Senate who were aged between 18 and 45, we find that the 140 to 150 men lost represents nearly all of the younger members of the Senate, indeed an entire generation of men still in the prime of their careers.

The impact of their loss was dramatic. On the one hand, those senators still living fit into one of two groups: the first had competed successfully for the top positions in the Republic; the second were those who had dropped out of competition because they had no chance for an advanced political career. Putting these two groups of surviving senators to the side, the Latin author Livy tells us that the emergency replacements of those who had died were to be lesser aristocrats who either had been rejected for senatorial membership in the past, or who had previously failed even to qualify.⁷ Many of these new replacements had grown old, and most were unlikely to have accomplished much of note once their brief political careers had ended. Thus, not only would this group of replacements lack the *auctoritas* of those who had just perished, but the still-surviving senators were themselves divided between those who had achieved the loftiest offices of state on the one hand, and those who had been defeated in their attempts on the other. As might be expected, those older distinguished men who had largely retired from active politics and warfare stood as the only real candidates for leadership of the Republic. Without much reluctance, it appears, they rejoined the political fray.

In the face of virtually no effective opposition, this junta of elder nobles came to dominate the political landscape for much of the remainder of the Hannibalic War. Now, to be

⁷ Cf. Livy 23.23

fair, most modern historians have looked at the years of war against Hannibal as a period of cooperation among the broader elite, who subordinated personal interest to the public good during a time of crisis. The larger body of senators, by this argument, collectively and purposefully allowed these older, more experienced men to lead the Republic until affairs had stabilized long enough to pass power back to the next generation. Unfortunately, I think this is hardly to be believed.⁸ In the years following the loss of a generation of senators, we have important examples of successful candidates from lesser families whose election results were deliberately stifled and rejected. Some who were running for the highest commands were even threatened with death if they chose to persist in their claim. Further, we hear that judicial tribunals and meetings of the Senate were moved outside of the gates of the city where they would not be protected by Rome's sacred prohibitions against certain types of magisterial violence. We also hear relatively frequent reports that commanders in the field ignored directives of the Senate without consequences, which would be rare indeed outside of these circumstances. Indeed, for over a decade during the Hannibalic War, the monopolization of the Republic's highest offices; the manipulation, and even hijacking, of elections in clear violation of precedent and protocol; and the domination of policy by a small group of charismatic men re-emerged as defining features of Republican politics, despite having largely disappeared over the preceding century.

I would like to end with a few words on the impact of this type of intense demographic shift. Ultimately, the rule of this regime proved to be a short-lived rupture in the movement towards collective governance. Still, I would argue that it had tremendous long-term consequences. As part of the reaction against this junta, Roman politics became far more

⁸ For this argument, cf. my upcoming dissertation to be published in July, 2016.

legalized and structured by the very generation which had been disenfranchised during the war. Many of the trends which emerged during the 4th and 3rd centuries to combat oligarchic rule, such as the customary prohibition against holding the same office twice, now became entrenched through law. The threat of a long-term return to a system of rule by the few, as well as the deaths of many of Rome's elites, also opened up the aristocracy considerably. When looking for an explanation for these developments, it would be disingenuous to point to demographic collapse as their sole cause. Still, if we are looking for triggers for such changes, we should understand that demographic shifts can play a role much like that played by institutional reconfigurations. On their own, neither a demographic nor a political argument can adequately explain the dramatic changes which took place during and after the Hannibalic War. On the other hand, any explanation that excludes demographic *or* institutional causes will unnecessarily risk being largely incomplete. The demographic toolbox, then, should be one that we always keep handy when dealing with these types of larger political and social changes.